DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 084 TM 021 973

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TITLE How Will National Curriculum Standards Be Assessed at the Local Level?
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum; *Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; Inservice Teacher Education; *Local Issues; *National Programs; Public Relations; *School Districts; Scoring; *Standards; Teacher Certification; Teacher Education; Test Construction; *Test Use
IDENTIFIERS *National Standards; Prototypes

ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the issues involved in assessing national-curriculum standards at the local level. Some of the things that might foster the use of high-quality assessments include: (1) feasible and assessable state content standards; (2) a clear purpose for each assessment; (3) an emphasis on valid, fair, and reliable classroom assessment; (4) rethinking preservice teacher training and certification requirements; (5) adequate inservice training for teachers; (6) prototype assessments and scoring rubrics; (7) some good public relations; and (8) adequate time and resources for developing, implementing, and revising the assessments. (Contains 6 references.) (Author/SLD)

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# How Will National Curriculum Standards Be Assessed at the Local Level?

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Presented as part of the symposium, "How Will the National Curriculum Standards be Measured at the National, State, and Local Levels?" at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education and the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 6, 1994



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**Abstract**

This paper explores some of the issues involved in assessing national curriculum standards at the local level. Some of the things that might foster use of high quality assessments include: (1) feasible and assessable state content standards; (2) a clear purpose for each assessment; (3) an emphasis on valid, fair and reliable classroom assessment; (4) rethinking preservice teacher training and certification requirements; (5) adequate inservice training for teachers; (6) prototype assessments and scoring rubrics; (7) some good PR; and (8) adequate time and resources for developing, implementing and revising the assessments.

The issue of how national standards will be assessed at the local level will clearly have a lot to do with state policies. That's certainly been the case in Illinois. What's happened in our state illustrates what might occur when the national standards are adopted. In the mid-80s, Illinois established 34 goals for learning in six subject areas. Many of these goals are assessed by multiple-choice state assessments in reading, math, science and social studies; there is also a statewide performance assessment in writing. In addition to the state assessment, each of the state's 930 districts has been required to have curriculum objectives based on the state goals and to assess attainment of those objectives every year, using valid, reliable and fair measures. Nearly every district responded to the assessment requirements by administering norm-referenced tests. Those districts did so secure in the knowledge that everything one needed to know about validity, reliability and fairness was contained in the test publishers' manuals. This information was regarded with a certain awe, since it was both scientific (anything that employs numbers with that many decimal places *must* be scientific) and untouched by human hands (or at least those of the district staff, who knew that the information was in the manual somewhere, but hadn't gotten around to looking at it yet). Everything proceeded smoothly for a number of years. Although the learning objectives generally languished ignored in file cabinets, the standardized tests got a real workout every spring. The state made only desultory efforts to monitor compliance and instruction and classroom assessments received no scrutiny whatever. Reliability and validity were considered only within the context of standardized testing (insofar as anyone thought about them at all). Then in 1991 the state announced their new school accreditation system and all hell broke loose.

Like most states, Illinois used to base public school accreditation on compliance with state law. If a school had fire extinguishers, exit signs, certified teachers and the necessary amount

of instructional time, it was pretty well assured of maintaining its accreditation. Under the new guidelines, however, compliance with state law is only one of the three factors that are considered. The other two are performance on the state assessments and an elaborate curriculum, instruction and assessment framework to be developed by each school. To create this framework, every school faculty is to cooperatively develop learning outcomes (that's Illinoisan for content standards) that address each of the 34 state learning goals. They must plan and document that they deliver instruction that is aligned with the outcomes. So far, nothing revolutionary. What *is* extraordinary is the associated assessment system that the school staff must also develop to measure attainment of the learning outcomes. The state requires a minimum of two assessments per outcome, at least one of which *must* be a performance assessment. Depending on the number of outcomes, this could easily add up to over 100 assessments per grade. Records of the results of each of these assessments must be maintained for the student population as a whole and disaggregated by a host of group membership variables. The object is to provide data to drive the school's improvement plan. Finally, detailed, written evidence of the validity, reliability and fairness of each of these dozens of performance and other assessments must be obtained by the school staff and submitted for state inspection. All of this fairly sophisticated assessment development must be done within about two years by people who may have had no measurement training at all, since Illinois inexplicably does not require a measurement course for teacher certification. Or even administrative certification, for that matter. The magnitude of the schools' task is enormous and the timeline is tight.

After a year of working with school staff on their assessments, I've observed that the reaction of most teachers and principals can be described remarkably well using the stages that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) outlined in *On Death and Dying*: denial, anger, bargaining,

depression and acceptance. Those in denial say things like, "The state's not really going to enforce all those crazy requirements." That kind of thinking gives way to anger ("How dare they ask us to do all of this without providing time, money and training?"), bargaining ("Is a five-word answer still considered a short answer, or can we count that as an extended-response performance assessment?"), depression ("This is hopeless. I don't have the energy to even think about this.") and, finally, acceptance.

The amount of work to be done is truly staggering. Not only must teachers develop learning outcomes, but they must revamp their lesson plans to address the new outcomes, while at the same time constructing dozens of professional quality assessments. Part of the what makes the process so overwhelming for teachers and principals is the requirement that they document the validity, reliability and fairness of their classroom assessments. They are not used to having their classroom assessments scrutinized for technical quality and they regard that type of information as strictly the province of psychometricians. Another major problem is their unfamiliarity with the development and use of performance assessments, particularly how to establish scoring rubrics that focus on the most relevant dimensions of student performance and which can be applied in a consistent fashion by all of the teachers at a grade level. Couple these types of concerns with elementary teachers' probable discomfort with the intricacies of the many subject areas in which national standards are being developed and you get some indication of the issues that will be encountered when schools begin to assess the national standards locally.

If the national standards are going to be measured well at the local level, quality classroom assessment, including many types of performance assessment, will be critical. The once-a-year snapshot that a district's norm referenced test provides will not be enough, just as it never has been enough to guide instruction on a day-to-day basis. Despite what might appear

at the marketplace, teachers will almost certainly need to develop and score some of their own assessments. In the remainder of this paper, I will suggest some things that might foster use of the high quality classroom assessments that will be needed to support instruction addressing the national standards.

1. *The state content standards should be feasible and assessable.* Otherwise, they will be quite justifiably ignored. Despite the recommendation to the National Education Goals Panel (Wurtz & Malcom, 1993) that state content standards be feasible and assessable, preliminary information about some of the national standards suggests that these qualities aren't always uppermost in the developers' minds. This is exemplified by the high school social studies teacher who said that the 439 pages of draft standards in history, geography and civics wouldn't be a problem "if you give me the latitude not to graduate students until they're 28 years old" (cited in Viadero, 1994). The states need to be sensitive to such concerns as they decide what parts of the national standards to incorporate in their curriculum frameworks.

   In addition to being feasible, the national and state content standards should be measurable. If accountability is emphasized, anything that can't be readily assessed will be pushed aside. If it's not obvious to the average classroom teacher how to assess some content standards, the subject groups would do well to provide some good prototypes. It is worth keeping in mind that most people doing the assessing at the elementary level will not be content area experts.

2. *Clarify the purpose of each assessment.* Have a clear vision of what each assessment is intended to accomplish. It is necessary to make the distinction between assessments primarily intended to inform classroom instruction on a day-to-day basis and

accountability measures. And despite the often-heard complaints about too much testing, it is not realistic to expect that a single measure will provide useful information for both purposes. Multiple measures are given considerable lip service, but they are too rarely employed in practice. Expecting a single measure to do too much will cause problems, no matter whether it's a standardized test or a performance assessment.

3. *Emphasize the importance of valid, reliable and fair classroom assessment.* I'm aware that this recommendation may sound strange in view of the way this requirement was received in Illinois, but these characteristics are crucial and too often ignored, especially with regard to performance assessments. The criticisms of standardized tests have been extensively discussed generally relate either directly or indirectly to the tests' validity. For example, instruction can become so tied to the format and content of the test that important content and skills never get covered and re-use of the same test may lead to higher scores without a corresponding increase in actual achievement levels. The same things can happen with other types of assessments as well. We need to be sure that assessments adequately cover the instructional content, that results are generalizable, and that scoring is reliable. The fact that an assessment is low-stakes doesn't mean that validity and reliability aren't important. We still want to have good information on which to base decisions about students.

4. *Rethink preservice training and certification requirements.* Rick Stiggins (1988), in his studies of classroom assessment, found that even if teachers have received preservice training in assessment (and many have not), that training was not perceived as being helpful in day-to-day classroom activities. That's because measurement courses have

traditionally focused on standardized tests and statistical concepts. "Daily assignments, performance assessments, tests that accompany textbooks, and oral questions--all key strategies of classroom assessment--are virtually ignored" (p. 365). If states require meaningful and useful measurement training, then the teacher training institutions will surely provide it.

5. *Provide adequate inservice training for teachers.* While appropriate preservice training will eventually go a long way toward advancing the cause of teaching and assessing the national standards, it clearly won't be enough. If change is going to occur anytime soon, it is necessary that substantial amounts of inservice training be provided so that teachers will know how to construct and appropriately use all of the different types of assessments that will come into play when the national standards are adopted. This is an area in which there must be many partners--state departments of education, universities, district administrators, regional educational labs, test and textbook publishers, the federal government, professional organizations. The task is monumental. It will be expensive, but the cost of *not* doing it will be greater still.

6. *Provide teachers with prototype assessment tasks and scoring rubrics.* It's a lot easier to come up with your own assessments if you have good models to follow. Lorrie Shepard has been working intensively with some elementary school teachers in Colorado. When asked what advice she had for others doing assessment training, Shepard (personal communication, February 18, 1994) said, "Give them *stuff*." Teachers want and need examples and they have neither the time nor the desire to reinvent the wheel. One place where models would be helpful is textbooks and accompanying teacher's manuals, once

they come to reflect the national standards. Replace (or at least augment) some of those matching, true-false and multiple-choice questions at the end of the chapter (especially those that assess only recall) with some extended-response questions and ideas for projects and performances that require the student to display some critical thinking skills. Include the scoring rubrics, so that both students and teachers have a clear idea of what to aim for. If the national standards groups truly want to influence classroom practice, they will provide models that can be used in classrooms by all teachers, not just subject area specialists. These models must include some suggested scoring guidelines that include a detailed description of what each point on the rating scale means. It's been my experience that it's much easier to find worthwhile instructional tasks than it is to devise the scoring rubrics that will turn those tasks into good assessments. It is for that reason that I was pleased to see the extensive collection of rubrics in Marzano, Pickering and McTighe's *Assessing Student Outcomes* (1993). More of that is needed. I can envision a CD-ROM disk that can store hundreds of performance tasks and rubrics indexed by the content standards addressed and grade level.

7. *Do some good PR.* In this era of site-based management and local empowerment, many view the imposition of state standards, let alone national ones as paradoxical at best and repugnant at worst, especially in light of how little funding comes from the federal government. Although that kind of thinking is based on misconceptions about the national standards, those feelings must be addressed. Explain--to teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, legislators, students, the business community--why it's important and beneficial to assess the national standards well.

8. *Provide adequate time and resources for developing, implementing and revising assessments*. A survey of Illinois educators (Kolls, Matter, Perlman and Yakamowski, 1994) indicated that one of their most serious concerns about the new accreditation system was how little time was allocated to developing and validating assessments. A comprehensive system of quality assessments will not be cheap and it won't come quickly either. But it *can* be done. Once we all arrive at the stage of acceptance.

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